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## Filmmaker and Cancer Survivor to Visit Illinois Wesleyan

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March 25, 1998

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## **Filmmaker and Cancer Survivor to Visit Illinois Wesleyan**

BLOOMINGTON, Ill.--Independent filmmaker Judith Helfand will visit Illinois Wesleyan University this week to present and discuss her experience with DES-related cancer.

Helfand, whose cervical cancer was caused by the drug diethylstilbestrol (DES), will present her documentary, "A Healthy Baby Girl," on Thursday, March 26, at 7 p.m. in the AV room of IWU's Sheean Library.

Following the film presentation, Helfand and IWU writer in residence Sandra Steingraber will lead a discussion on hormone-interfering chemicals like DES. The presentation is open to the public and free-of-charge.

Helfand's film focuses on the traumatic effects of DES, an anti-miscarriage drug given to pregnant women for over 30 years. The drug, which proved ineffective and carcinogenic, left DES-exposed children like Helfand with serious medical problems.

"At the heart of the work was the hope that my mother and I wouldn't let this horrible experience get truly inside of us and between us, and that we would be able to grow old together in peace," Helfand explains. "The story of a middle-class suburban Jewish family openly dealing with the impact of DES-related cancer translates the abstract threat of toxic exposure into something that can happen to anyone."

Helfand's battle with cancer began at the age of 25, when she underwent a radical hysterectomy after a cervical cancer diagnosis. Following the surgery, Helfand returned home to her family in Long Island and began to film her recovery and its effects.

Completed after five years of filming, the video diary "A Healthy Baby Girl" has been featured in both the 1997 Sundance Film Festival and the San Francisco Jewish Film Festival, and was presented on the PBS series P.O.V. last June.

In addition, the film captured best documentary honors at the Melbourne International Film Festival and best video documentary at the Atlanta Film & Video Festival.

**(more)**

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"It's an amazing film, and it's suprisingly funny," says Steingraber, an author and biologist who has worked with Helfand on previous environmental projects. "It's a carefully controlled balance between the political and the personal."

In past work, Helfand has shared directing or producing responsibilities on PBS documentaries including "The Uprising of '34," "Broken Minds, a Frontline," and "Through the Wire." She has also run video and media literacy workshops and recently designed a video production program for homeless, mentally ill adults in New York City.

Helfand's next project will focus on a national campaign for Health Care Without Harm, a national coalition fighting for environmentally safe hospital practices.

Helfand is a graduate of New York University's Tisch School of the Arts in the Undergraduate Film and Television Program.

IWU, founded in 1850, enrolls about 2,000 students in a College of Liberal Arts, College of Fine Arts, and a four-year professional School of Nursing. A \$15 million athletics and recreation center opened in the fall of 1994; and a \$25 million science building opened in the fall of 1995. The \$5.1 million Center for Liberal Arts--a facility housing 60 faculty offices, six classrooms, and other facilities for social science, humanities, business and economics, and interdisciplinary studies' faculty--opened in August, 1997, as well as a new \$6.8 million residence hall. The Carnegie Commission for the Advancement of Teaching promoted Illinois Wesleyan to a "Baccalaureate I" institution in 1994, a classification that places it among 159 highly selective National Liberal Arts Colleges in the annual *U.S. News & World Report* rankings. *Barron's Profiles of American Colleges*, another respected college guide, rated IWU "highly competitive (+)" in its latest edition.